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Welcome To Our World

by [Raberba girl \(Raberba_girl\)](#)

Summary

AU. A special education classroom in an elementary school. WARNING for sensitive subject matter (and brief language).

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Welcome To Our World

(rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: AU. A special education classroom in an elementary school. WARNING for sensitive subject matter (and brief language).

A/N: I'm nervous about posting this story, because people who are not familiar with special ed will think this is crazy, and people who *are* familiar with special ed might get offended, which was never never never my intention. I seriously cannot control my muse. :/

Also, I have a rule to never cuss in my fanfiction except (ironically) in religious contexts, but this was one of the very few times where I felt like I had to make an exception.

O.O.O

Saïx didn't mind being cold nearly as much as Demyx did, so they had fallen into trading off on outside duties, depending on the weather. That morning, Saïx waited at the bus loop with his hands resting comfortably in his coat pockets, listening to the other assistants on duty chatting together.

The door to the building opened, and Axel came out.

That was a bad sign.

"I take it I'm going to need your help?" Saïx asked dryly.

"Sapphique called," Axel confirmed, shaking his head. "Roxas is having a rough morning."

"Wonderful."

"Well," Axel chuckled, "at least you'll only have to put up with it for half as long today, right?"

"I'm only taking the afternoon off, by which time he'll have gotten over the worst of it."

"Silver lining, Sai," Axel reminded him.

"...I'll only have to put up with it for half as long today."

Axel laughed.

A minute later, the bus appeared in the distance. "And here we go!" Axel cheered, throwing his arms in the air.

"Here we go," Saïx agreed heavily.

The bus pulled up in its usual painstaking way, pausing for a long moment before the door opened. Xion disembarked almost at once, started to stalk past Saïx as if he didn't exist, then stumbled a bit as she noticed Axel. She swerved back and walked straight into her teacher, pressing her face into the front of his coat.

"Hey, girl! How you doing this morning?"

"...."

"Xi, how 'bout a hug?" Axel prompted. Still no response, so he finally set his hands on her shoulders and pushed back a bit, then hugged her properly. She slowly brought up her arms to return the gesture. "Okay, Xi, I have to take care of your buddy now. Go over and wait with Mr. Saïx, okay?"

Her blue eyes turned to Saïx, then narrowed. "No."

Axel leaned down and looked her straight in the eyes. "Xion. My darling. Is Roxas having a good day today?"

"No." She smiled a little. "He hit Mr. Brown."

"Uh huh. So who's gonna be hogging alllll of Mr. Axel's attention this morning?"

She sighed.

"I love you, honey, but you're gonna have to be a good girl and be nice to Mr. Saïx today, okay?"

She gazed back at him without saying anything.

"Promise?"

Without answering, she suddenly turned away, marched over to Saïx, glared at his shoes, looked up to glare at his face, then crossed her arms and turned her back on him. She was, however, staying put.

"Thanks, sweetie," Axel called. Then he turned all his attention back to the bus.

"Xion," Saïx tried, "will you help me bring Ventus inside?"

She gave him a wary side-eye.

"I'll get him off the bus, and you can push him into the cafeteria."

Her body was now angled more toward him than away. "I'mma take care of Ven," she said testingly.

"That's right."

The bus driver and assistant had finally managed to coax Roxas out of his seat, but were now trying to fend him off as he kept striking out at them every time they tried to bring him closer to the door. Axel hopped up the stairs and called the boy's name.

Roxas gave him a wary look.

"Hi there, buddy! You wanna come down and have breakfast with us?" *'Not that you'll actually eat anything, but whatever.'*

"Hate you!" Roxas suddenly screamed.

"Mama called and told me why you're upset," Axel said soothingly. "But we're at school now and we can still have a good day, okay? You ready to come on in?"

Roxas jerked back again and half-fell, trying to wrestle out of the others' grip on him.

Axel sighed. "C'mon, Rox...."

Saïx, meanwhile, was at the back, lowering the wheelchair to the ground as Xion looked on. "Good morning, Ventus."

No acknowledgement, though the boy smiled when he saw Xion waiting for him.

She came forward, now smiling herself. "You ready to see everyone?" she cooed. "I'mma push you inside, okay?"

One of his stiff hands reached up to her vaguely, and she held it for a moment before going around to take hold of the wheelchair handles.

Inside the cafeteria, where Demyx sat at a table with Sora and Kairi, he looked up and saw the little procession heading their way. "Ven, my man!" he called "What's up, dude? Hiya, Xi!"

"Hi, Mr. Demyx," she called.

"Whoa!" Demyx yelped. "Waitwaitwait SORA, oi, get back here, kiddo! You don't go popping up out of your seat whenever you feel like it, man!"

Excited and torn, the boy hovered between the two groups, looking back and forth between his approaching friends and his assistant teacher.

"Sora, come *back*, then you can say hi," Demyx said firmly. Sora suddenly ran back and plopped right into his lap. "Oof!"

Xion and Ven came wheeling up.

"*Now?*" Sora asked in sign language.

"Sure, kiddo."

Sora jumped up again and gave Xion an enthusiastic hug, then stroked Ven's hair as they beamed at each other. As Kairi came around the table to join them, Ven's hand stretched out restlessly.

"Demyx," Saïx said, indicating the comm board.

"Huh? Oh!"

Saïx guided Ven's hand, and the boy's finger suddenly stabbed down hard at the symbol he wanted. "*Good morning!*" Demyx's recorded voice chirped.

"How 'bout Mr. Saïx?" Demyx prompted.

Sora studied Saïx for a minute. Then he smiled and stuck out his hand, and Saïx shook it. "Good morning, Sora."

"Good morning."

"Hello," Kairi said politely, though she kept her distance.

"Good morning, Kairi."

"Hey, Ven, where's your brother?" Demyx asked, though his eyes flicked questioningly to Saïx.

As if on cue, the cafeteria doors opened again.

"Eh!" Demyx exclaimed in dismay at the flash of red hair. "Axel had to come out again?"

"It's going to be one of those days," Saïx confirmed.

"Aw, boo." Then Demyx put on a smile and waved. "Good morning, Roxas!" he called to the boy coming in.

Roxas yelled, suddenly halting and trying to drive an elbow back into his teacher's gut. Axel avoided the attack and urged him on again, keeping up the cheerful tone. "Breakfast time, Rox! Aren't you happy to see all your friends?"

"Wanna go home!" Roxas snarled, eyes raking the room as if searching for escape routes.

"Sorry, buddy, it's not time to go home. We're at school and we're gonna have a *really great* day today...."

They got Roxas into a seat, where he glared around at the rest of the class.

"Hi, Roxas," Kairi said, waving. Roxas struck out at her arm, though not purposefully enough to hurt her. She looked questioningly at her teacher.

"It's okay, Kai, just let him cool off a bit," Axel said. Kairi gave Roxas another uncertain smile and went back to eating.

Sora came from seemingly out of nowhere, trying to throw his arms around Roxas in greeting. Roxas yelled and struck out again, harder this time.

"Urk! Sora, back off, back off, buddy," Axel said quickly, pushing him toward Demyx. "Let's give Roxas some space, okay? He ain't a happy camper this morning."

"Good morning," Sora tried anyway, though Roxas wasn't looking at him.

"Sora, those Froot Loops look really good!" Demyx exclaimed. "Better finish 'em before I come steal some, heh. Nom nom nom nom!"

Sora gave him an incredulous smile and went back to eating as well.

Saïx had come back with a tray by this time, which he now placed on the table. "It seems like such a waste for them to keep paying for his food when he never eats it...."

Smiling a little in response, Axel looked back at Roxas and said brightly, "Hey, Rox, you hungry?"

"Ragh!" Roxas shouted at him.

"Not even for the cinnamon roll? Sweet, junk food, mmmm!"

Roxas glared.

"Axel," Saïx suddenly warned.

A figure was approaching which seemed severely out of place in the noisy elementary school cafeteria. Tall, elegant, with flowing silvery hair and an impeccable business suit, the man drifted amongst the slightly awestruck and somewhat intimidated small children as if he was a visitor

from an entirely different world. The shorter figure following in his wake seemed easily overlooked.

"Good morning," Axel said.

"Good morning," the man returned coolly.

"How's Riku today?"

"Cooperative," Sephiroth replied, in a tone that indicated firm expectation rather than an accurate report. He glanced to the side, where Riku was sullenly slouching up. "Riku, greet your teachers."

"Good morning," the boy mumbled. He seemed completely unresponsive when Sora and Kairi both ran up to hug him and when Xion patted his arm, though his lack of withdrawal was actually a good sign.

"Morning!" Demyx said brightly, and was ignored by both father and son.

As Riku slid into a seat, Roxas, who hadn't been paying attention at all, suddenly screamed and flung himself hard against Axel, trying unsuccessfully to escape again. Sephiroth gave him a long look of distaste before turning back to his son, pulling the boy's headphones down around his neck. "I'm leaving now, Riku. You are going to behave today."

"...."

Sephiroth set his hands down firmly on the table on either side of Riku and leaned down, long hair spilling around them, so that Riku seemed almost completely enclosed as his father bent to speak into his ear. Riku hissed a little, barely able to move.

"I had better get a good report," Sephiroth warned in a rumbling murmur, "or there will be hell to pay."

"...."

His tone hardened. "You are showing your father a sad lack of respect."

"Okay!" Riku suddenly shouted. "I'll behave!"

The moment held, simply to make a point. Then, as soon as he was released, Riku shoved his headphones back on and buried his face in his arms. Sephiroth nodded to the teachers and left, not seeming to notice Sora glaring after him.

"Nothing," Saïx observed quietly. Riku's arms were both bare, since he couldn't stand wearing sleeves even in freezing weather, and unmarked.

"You're okay, buddy," Axel muttered. He risked sparing an arm to pat Riku on the back, though Roxas immediately tried to take advantage of the opening and forced him to occupy both hands again.

"Riku, you want some breakfast?" Demyx asked cheerfully.

"Leave me alone."

"You'll feel better with a full tummy!"

Riku seemed to scrunch tighter into himself. Sora patted his head, and Riku batted him away.

"Sora, sit down and eat, you're running out of time," Saïx said.

"So are you, kiddo," Axel said to his fuming charge. "You gonna flip out if I let go, or you gonna try some of that yummy-looking cinnamon roll?"

Their last student soon arrived, a golden-haired girl half-hidden behind her father. "Who's that pretty girl!" Demyx cried, throwing his hands up. "*Who's* that gorgeous little princess?"

Naminé ducked her head, though not in time to hide a shy smile.

"We have the money for Friday," Marluxia said, laying a sealed envelope on the table.

Axel nodded and handed it to Saïx, catching Roxas's milk on the rebound before the boy could knock it over. "You guys coming, too?"

"No. My wife and I will both be busy that day."

"Shame," Axel said, watching with a little smile as Naminé happily let herself be hugged by Sora, Kairi, and Xion. "Well, Naminé'll have fun, at any rate." The girl shuffled over to be hugged by Demyx, then waved hesitantly at Roxas, shrinking back at his fierce glare. "Better keep your distance from Roxas this morning, Nami-chan. He's not in a good mood yet."

A little glumly, she sat down and then reached out for the tray Saïx set down in front of her, tugging it closer. Marluxia bent over her, causing her to shrink down even more. "I'm leaving now, all right? You have a good day today," he said in mild warning. There was no response, and he finally kissed the top of her head and left.

"Urgh," Roxas snarled, shoving back against Axel again.

"You're not gonna escape, kiddo," Axel laughed in mild exasperation. "Where you trying to go, anyway?"

"I don't *like it here!*" Roxas shouted.

"You and me both," Saïx agreed in a barely audible grumble as he helped Naminé peel the top off her package of cereal.

Axel laughed. "See, Rox? You and Mr. Saïx have something in common! You guys should get along better."

"Ragh!"

There was a minute or so of relative calm as the kids who were eating continued to eat, and then Saïx glanced at the clock. "Axel," he murmured.

"Hm?" Axel leaned back. "Oops - looks like it's that time, Riku."

No response.

"7:30, my man. Headphones off."

No response.

Demyx got up in a businesslike way. "C'mon, Riku, time to socialize with our friends," he said, reaching for the headphones. Riku surged up and fought him. The struggle was swift; a couple moments later, Riku's hands were suddenly groping on air, and Demyx managed to toss the headphones to Saïx before Riku could touch them again, the cord getting yanked out of the music player in the process.

"Give them back!" Riku bellowed, prompting a series of piercing shrieks from Roxas, but Demyx kept him in his chair and Saïx got the headphones out of sight. The noise was deafening, as poor Naminé miserably tried to shield her hearing and Ven stirred restlessly. Sora ran up, squeezed between Demyx and Riku, and threw his arms around his friend in a tight hug.

"It's okay, Riku, it's okay," Kairi said, barely able to be heard through the noise as she tried to get hold of Riku's hands.

"Let go of me!" Riku shouted. Demyx glanced questioningly at Axel, who gave a hesitant nod. Demyx cautiously released his grip. "Get away from me!"

"We'll see how this works, Ri," Demyx said, backing off and perching on the edge of the table. With Sora and Kairi still trying to soothe him, Riku pressed his palms against his ears and shouted wordlessly into the tabletop.

"Oh, what a beautiful morning," Axel sang, pretty much drowned out by all the screaming, "oh, what a beautiful day."

Demyx laughed and joined in. *"I've got a wonderful feeling, everything's going my way!"*

Saïx rolled his eyes.

Riku soon calmed down under Sora's and Kairi's ministrations, though it took Roxas longer. When he had finally sat for a full ten seconds without screaming or struggling, Axel tried the cinnamon roll again. Roxas managed to get two fingers under his tray and flung it.

"Waaaahhh!!!" Demyx cried as Naminé was completely splattered with Roxas's breakfast. She sat there, dripping, wide-eyed and open-mouthed in surprise. "Look what you did to Naminé!"

"Look what you did to Naminé, Roxas!" Axel repeated, obviously attempting to not burst into laughter. "Why did you do that to Naminé? Was she bugging you? Was harmless little Naminé who wouldn't hurt a fly bugging you?" He couldn't see Roxas's face, and it took him too long to realize that the boy seemed genuinely remorseful. Roxas growled softly, staring at Naminé, then suddenly started banging his head against the table. "Whoa, whoa, hey, knock it off!" This time, he wasn't able to dodge the elbow to the gut. "Urgh...."

Demyx, meanwhile, was trying to get the mess on the table sorted out. Saïx, armed with a wad of napkins, wiped the milk off Naminé's neck and sponged it out of her hair as best he could, then stared a little helplessly at the ketchup and juice stains all down the front of her dress. She continued to sit without moving at all, still consumed by surprise.

"Why do they always dress her in white?" Demyx wondered. "I mean, they *know* what it's like in our room."

"They're probably collecting evidence about how incompetent and lacking in control we are," Saïx grumbled as the napkins in his hands got stained with crimson goop.

"Both of you shut up," Axel ordered. "I don't need anymore reasons to have a grudge against Mr. Flower Otaku and his charming wife." He noticed that Riku was giggling now as he watched Naminé getting cleaned up. "Oi, what's so funny over there?"

The rest of breakfast was relatively calm as Riku, now in a better mood, sat motionlessly while Sora and Kairi chattered at him and each other. Although he didn't speak and ignored direct questions, his contribution to the conversation was to not hide from it, which Axel appreciated. "We're gettin' there, buddy...."

After the bell rang and the cafeteria had been emptied of other students, the little class got up to dump their uneaten food and head for class. Roxas made a break for it, though Axel caught him just before he reached the doorway. Demyx and Saïx herded the rest of the children toward the doors closer to their classroom, with Xion wheeling Ven along again.

"Need help?" Demyx called, barely heard through all the furious screaming.

"I'll be fine, go ahead and take the others," Axel called back, sounding quite casual despite simultaneously grappling to keep Roxas's fingers away from his eyes.

In the room, most of the children dutifully milled around near the coat hooks, though Riku stalked straight for the computer and Naminé wandered off in the direction of the art supplies.

"Nami-chan!" Demyx called, having to repeat her name twice before she paused and looked at him. "Pick up your backpack, hon. You have to go hang it up, remember?"

Slowly, Naminé wandered back to obey.

"You, too, Riku," Saïx sighed, heading after him. Naminé had probably just forgotten again, but with Riku, it was most likely deliberate.

Riku had just turned on the computer.

"Riku. No. No computer until after lunch, you know that. Go pick up your backpack, we don't just drop them on the floor when we enter the classroom."

Riku ignored him.

Saïx switched off the computer monitor and shielded the button when Riku angrily pounced at it. "*Go pick up your backpack.*"

As that struggle was being resolved, Axel was fighting his way into the classroom with Roxas. As soon as they crossed the threshold and he was released, Roxas ran straight for the kitchen,

screaming at the top of his lungs as he began pounding on the walls and knocked the basket of spare utensil packages to the floor. "Quiet room, Rox!" Demyx called over the noise, going over to herd him toward it. Roxas saw him coming and immediately fled into the small enclosed area in a corner of the classroom, flinging himself violently against its carpeted walls and redoubling his screams.

"Roxas, be good!" Xion yelled, though it was doubtful he even heard her.

"He's all right," Saïx told her, laying a hand on her head and warily watching for a minute to make sure Roxas kept his venting confined to the quiet room. "Go on and sit down, we're going to do calendar in a minute."

"Don't like calendar," Xion declared, pushing his hand away.

Saïx raised an eyebrow. "You don't like calendar, or you don't like me?"

Xion giggled sheepishly and pushed him a little, in an almost reconciliatory way. He led her to a chair and then reached for the clipboard, starting to try to catch up with the documentation.

"Nuh uh, Sora, bring it back," Axel called.

Sora stared at him in confusion.

"Come dump Roxas's backpack on the floor again, he has to pick it up himself later."

Confused stare.

"*Sora*," Axel repeated, half-laughing in exasperation and this time signing as he spoke, "bring Roxas's backpack back where he dropped it and *leave* it there."

Still staring at him and now looking incredulous, Sora grudgingly obeyed. "*Wrong*," he insisted. "*Have to hang the backpacks up.*"

"I know, buddy," Axel chuckled. "We have to hang our *own* backpacks up. If you keep cleaning up after Roxas, he'll be a lazy little punk and never get in the habit of doing it himself."

"*Wrong*," Sora grumbled. Axel ruffled his hair.

The public address system crackled. "*Good morning, teachers and students!*" the principal's voice echoed brightly.

"Time for the pledges, everyone stand up," Axel instructed as the principal went on with the date and time. "Nami-chan! Pledge!"

The girl rose to her feet and almost sorrowfully laid her hand over her heart.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag..." Axel, Demyx, and Saïx recited dutifully, though only Sora was bothering to sign along. Kairi and Xion, who sometimes at least made an effort, were more interested in watching Roxas, who suddenly ripped off his shoes and flung them out into the classroom, screaming louder than ever. Axel sighed and went over to sit with him.

"They should switch to televised announcements like all the other schools are doing," Saïx muttered.

"Yeah, so that Roxas won't throw shoes at the PA," Demyx laughed.

Several seconds after the pledges had ended and the principal had moved on to announcements, Ven's vacant stare sharpened and his fingers slid over the comm board almost as an afterthought. "*Today is Wednesday!*" Demyx's recorded voice chirped brightly.

"Almost, Ven," Demyx laughed. "That's for calendar."

Saïx went over and gently shifted the boy's hand a little. "*I pledge allegiance to the flag!*"

"Good job, Ven!" Demyx praised, and Sora applauded.

"Good job, Ven," Xion repeated, going over to pet his hair, and Kairi clapped as well. Ven smiled.

At the end of announcements, Roxas was curled up on the floor with his face hidden against Axel's leg and his hands pressed over his ears, as Axel patted his back soothingly. "There, look, announcements are over. No more voices blaring from the ceiling. Think you can get up and come join us for calendar?"

"...."

"C'mon, Rox, let's go for it!"

"...."

"You want me to start with the others?" Saïx asked, but a minute later, Axel had managed to coax Roxas over to the table. The boy sat down rigidly, his mouth tight, staring hard at the spaces between people and avoiding meeting anyone's gaze.

"Glad to have ya, Rox," Demyx said, ruffling his hair as he scooted over to sit behind him. Roxas tried to hit his arm and then resumed gripping the edges of the chair.

"All righty, then!" Axel said brightly as he took his place at the head of the table. "Who's gonna be our helper today?" As usual, Sora practically fell out of his seat waving his hand in the air and Kairi copied him more sedately, even though it was always decided by chance. "Looks like iiiit's..." Axel said, drawing a random decorated stick out of the cup. "...Xion!"

Xion beamed, as Sora made his exaggerated kicked-puppy slump of disappointment. Kairi patted his head.

"Come over here, Xi, and show us what day today is. Nami-chan, sit up, darling, it's not time to sleep. You, too, Riku."

No response from the boy, though Naminé sloooooowly raised her head.

"Riku, sit up," Saïx ordered.

Ignoring the ensuing scuffle in a practiced way, Axel supervised as Xion chose the correct items to place on the calendar. "Whoops, that one's upside-down, turn it around-- *There* ya go! All right, Sora, what day is it?"

"Wednesday, December 13th, 2012," the boy signed enthusiastically.

"Good job! Kairi, what day is today?"

"Wednesday, December 13th, 2012," she said.

"Awesome! Ven, what day is today?"

Saïx had his hands full with Riku, so Sora ran over to the comm board. *"Today is Wednesday!"*

"Sora," Axel chided, "Ven's supposed to do it himself."

Sora gave him blank look.

"You can guide his hand, but don't-- Yeah, but let him--"

"My name is Ven!"

"Urk, wrong button. How about you try--"

Impatiently, Riku stormed out of his chair before Saïx could stop him and seized Ven's hand, planting it over the correct button. *"Today is Wednesday!"*

"Unh," Ven said in distress.

"Lighten up, Ri, you're hurting him," Axel warned as Saïx came up behind the boys, watching them like a hawk. Sora tried to take Ven's hand back, and Riku pushed him away.

"*Unh*," Ven insisted, now sounding upset.

"Let's see if Ven can do it himself," Saïx said in a threatening tone.

Riku glared, though his grip on Ven's hand relaxed. Sora cautiously nudged Ven's hand until it rested on another button. "*Today is December 13th, 2012!*"

"Yaaayyyy!" Axel cheered in exasperated relief, as Demyx laughed.

"Shut up," Roxas growled.

"Rox," Demyx warned.

"Okay!" Axel said quickly as Saïx tried to get the boys settled again, "Morning Song, Xi! It's track 6," Axel added as Xion poked at the CD player's buttons.

Roxas, who *hated* the Morning Song for some reason, slammed his head down on the table and gripped his ears with his hands. Demyx patted his back as he sang, his melodious voice seeming to fill the room. Riku rolled his eyes and covered his ears with his hands as well, though Saïx wouldn't let him hide. Unlike with Roxas, Riku's disdain for the song was simply a matter of taste.

"Good job, everyone!" Axel praised when the song had finished.

"Let's sing it again," Demyx teased.

"NO!" Roxas shouted into the table.

"Okay, okay, we won't sing it again until tomorrow," Axel assured him. "What's next, Xi?"

"Days of the week, days of the week," Sora was frantically signing long before Xion finally remembered.

"Days of the week."

"That's right! Track 14, hon."

Months of the year, numbers, alphabet, colors, weather....

"Let's see who's at school today," Axel continued when the weather song had finished. He took out the child-shaped cards with the kids' photographs on them, drew one at random, and handed it to Xion. "Who's that, Xi?"

She stared at it.

"Show it to the class! Who's that, guys?"

"Nami!" Sora signed proudly.

"Sora knows! Who is it, guys?"

"That's Naminé," Kairi said.

"It's Naminé!" Xion told him.

"Yup!"

A pause.

"HEY, NAMI-CHAN," Axel said loudly, "who's that?" He pointed at the picture in Xion's hand.

Naminé kept staring at the table, rocking slightly.

"Nami-chan," Demyx said, reaching out to shake her shoulder a little.

She looked up, blinking.

"Who's that, Nami-chan?" Axel asked in sing-song.

"It's Naminé," Riku burst out impatiently. Saïx patted his shoulder.

Naminé stared at her picture and the pink, girl-shaped card it had been glued to.

"Take the picture, Nami!" Sora urged.

Still staring.

"It's *you*, Naminé, dammit!" Riku barked. "Put it on the damn wall!"

"Riku," all three teachers warned in unison, with Kairi echoing them in dismay.

"Riku don't say that," Sora said reproachfully, *"gonna get your clip moved."* He glanced at the traffic-light-shaped behavior chart on the wall, where all the students' clips were currently clustered on the green light.

Riku glared at the table.

Naminé hadn't moved at all.

"Nami-chan, take the picture," Axel said patiently.

With Xion practically waving the card in her face, Naminé finally grasped it. Then just sat staring at it again.

"Nami-chan, are you a girl or a boy?" Axel asked.

"...."

He had to put his fingers under her chin and tilt her face up so that he could meet her eyes. "Are you a girl or a boy, Nami-chan?"

"Girl," she finally whispered.

"That's right! Excellent. Now go put it on the board, honey."

She stared down at her picture again, smiling faintly. Riku tried to lunge for the card, but Saïx held him back. With a lot of coaxing, Naminé slowly got out of her chair, shuffled over to the chart on the wall, and stuck it on randomly. It landed roughly half in one column and half in the other. Axel took hold of her arm and had her move it completely over into the "At school" column. "There you are!"

Naminé gave him a hesitant, questioning look through the pale yellow fringe of her bangs.

"Good job, Naminé!" Axel told her, and she smiled. Then ducked her head expectantly. He hugged her, and she shuffled back to her seat.

"Okay, who's next?"

"*ME!*" Sora eagerly seized his card with both hands and stared at his picture happily for a moment. Then he bounded over to the wall and proudly stuck his picture in the "At school" column. He turned back around, beaming.

"Great job, Sora! You *are* at school today!"

"*I'm a boy.*" Sora pointed at his card again, which was blue and shaped like a boy.

"That's right, you are a boy," Axel confirmed.

"*I did a good job.*"

"Yup, you did! Okay, Xi, who's next?"

Xion held up the card and threw it at Demyx, grinning. It fluttered in the air and landed upside-down on the back of Roxas's head. Roxas didn't move. "Is that me, Xion?" Demyx laughed.

"Mr. Demyx," Xion confirmed.

"It's Mr. Demyx!" Axel cheered, as Sora echoed him with his hands.

"Hooray," Saïx said flatly.

Axel picked up the card and cooed at Demyx in an exaggerated version of the tone he used with the kids. "Is Mr. Demyx a *boy* or a *girl*?"

"Hmmmm, I'm a GIRL, right?" Demyx said gleefully.

"NO!!!" Kairi and Xion shrieked, with Sora signing furiously beside them. Naminé stared at them, startled. "No way! You're not a girl! You're a boy!"

"I'm a *boy*?" Demyx exclaimed, feigning deep shock.

"YOU'RE A BOY!!!!"

"Idiot," Riku grumbled. Roxas pressed his hands more tightly over his ears.

"I guess I'm a boy, Xion! Am I at home or at school today?"

"You're obviously at *home*," Axel said, his eyes twinkling.

"He's at *schooooo!*" Kairi and Xion insisted, as Sora pounded the table in frustration.

"I've got so many amazingly smart kids in my class!" Axel cheered. "Xion, go put Mr. Demyx's picture at school, okay?"

She did so. Sora came over and smacked his fist against the card as if making doubly-sure it would stick. "Okay," Axel laughed, "okay, Sora, we're just messing with you. Go sit down, 'kay?"

Xion looked at the next card, smiled, and held it out proudly.

"That's Ven!" Kairi exclaimed.

Sora snatched the card out of Xion's hand and ran to hold it right in the startled Ven's face.

"That's you, Ven!" Xion and Kairi called together.

After a moment, "*My name is Ven!*" Ven said uncertainly.

"That's right, Ven," Axel said. "Sora, get out of his face and wheel him up to the board, would you?"

As soon as Riku saw his card in Xion's hand, he seized it, stomped up to the board, slapped it in the "At school" column, screamed "I'm a frickin' boy!" in Axel's face, then stormed back to his seat and very nearly looked like he was about to go for Saïx's throat until Demyx meaningfully waved the computer card. Riku slammed his head down on his arms, and Axel motioned to the others to let him sulk for a while.

"Ew," Xion said, flinging the next card away from her like it was an insect.

"Let's try that again, Miss Xion," Axel said firmly, handing the card back to her.

Xion sighed loudly, took the card, then held it out to Saïx with a glare. "It's X-Face."

"AH," Axel warned.

"Mr. Saïx," Sora corrected.

"It's Mr. Saaaiiiiix," Xion drawled in distaste.

Saïx took the card, said "I am a boy and I am at school today" in a monotone, then held out the card to Sora. Sora ran gladly to grab it, gave the very startled Saïx an unexpected hug, then went to stick Saïx's card in the "At school" column.

"Mr. Saïx got a hug!" Demyx exclaimed. "Where's my hug?"

Sora stared at him.

"I want to give Mr. Demyx a hug," Kairi told Axel.

"Only if you give me one first," he teased.

Sora looked around at all the hugging and then wrapped his arms around the startled Naminé, then Xion, then Ven. He whirled around to Riku. "Get off." Sora squeezed him tighter. Riku made a disgruntled sound and waited for it to stop.

"Roxas," Xion asked, putting a hand on his head and trying unsuccessfully to see his face, "Can I hug you?"

"...."

"Mr. Sulkyboots needs a hug most of aaaall," Demyx laughed, hugging Roxas and simultaneously trying to drag him back upright. Roxas hit him and buried his face in his arms again. "Aw! So mean, Roxy!" Demyx whined playfully, as Saïx wrote a note on the clipboard.

"I'mma get you on the playground," Xion promised.

Axel chuckled. "All righty, who we got next? Oooh, looks like it's my homeboy here!"

A pause.

"Roxas, you're up!" Demyx chirped, poking at him.

"Leave me alone," Roxas mumbled.

Axel took the card from Xion and slipped it under Roxas's arms. Roxas abruptly surged halfway over the table before Demyx managed to catch onto his belt, and there was a brief but wild scuffle as Axel tried to fend him off. As soon as the boy's hands were under control, he tried head-butting Axel in the face and then the shoulder. Saïx put down the clipboard and got up to help, and between the three of them, they managed to get Roxas off the table and back in his seat.

"Hate you!" Roxas screamed.

"Quiet room?" Axel asked, but the only answer was another attempted head-butt. Riku was giggling again as he watched.

"Bad Roxas," Sora signed.

"Roxas, shut up!" Xion yelled. Roxas froze, staring at her.

"Xi, would you please show us that Roxas is in school today?" Axel said a little raggedly, maneuvering around to switch places with Demyx.

"You're at school," Xion told Roxas sternly, "and you're a boy." She slapped the card into the appropriate column in a disdainful sort of way. Roxas twisted his face to the side, against Axel's shoulder, and burst into tears.

After the three teachers shared a surprised look, Demyx moved to take charge at the head of the table as Saïx retrieved the documentation clipboard.

"Good job, Xi!" Demyx told her, "Roxas is at school today! Who's next?"

"Someone who's a bit tied up at the moment," Axel remarked when his own picture was revealed.

"Mr. Axel is at school today," Kairi offered.

"That's *right*!" Demyx exclaimed.

"*Boy!*" Sora signed triumphantly.

"Whoo! Go Sora and Kairi!"

"*My teacher is Mr. Axel!*" Ven successfully proclaimed, all by himself.

"Wooooowwww, we're on a roll today! I LOVE this class!" Demyx beamed, shooting Ven a thumbs-up and sticking Axel's picture on the chart.

There were three cards left in Xion's hand, two pink and one blue. Slyly, she flipped the blue card around.

"Well, look who it is!" Demyx reached for one of the other ones and held up the two cards with Xion's photograph on them. Her father always insisted on this - a fairly reasonable request, considering Xion's circumstances - even though she always chose the same one every single time.

"Are you a boy or a girl today, Xion?"

"I'm a girl." Xion confidently took the pink card and stuck it on the chart.

"Again," Saïx remarked dryly, prompting a slight smile from Axel.

"Xion's a girl!" Demyx proclaimed, ruffling her hair in lieu of the forbidden praise. "We'll let Daddy know. Okay, who've we got left?"

Kairi blinked, uncertain. Sora pointed at her wildly.

"Who is it, Xi?" Demyx grinned.

She turned over the card and stared at it.

"Kairi, Kairi!" Sora insisted.

"Look." Xion held out the card to Kairi, who grasped it.

"That's me," Kairi said.

"That's right, Kai!" Demyx chuckled.

"I'm a girl."

"Yup!"

"I am at school today." Kairi got up, placed her card on the chart, then turned around and smiled.

"Fantastic, Kai! Whoooo, we're done!" Demyx applauded, as Sora, Kairi, and Xion haltingly

followed suit.

"I hate this class," Riku abruptly declared.

"Too bad, because we *love* you," Axel said briskly. "Okay, guys, music time."

"Heeee, this is my favorite part," Demyx squealed in his fangirl voice, swirling elegantly in his chair to grab the bag of song cards. "Let's let VenVen pick the first song!"

Just as before, Demyx's voice went soaring up above the kids' in a fortunately pleasant way. It spurred Kairi and Xion to sing louder than they would have otherwise, and caused Naminé to stare at Demyx with interest rather than vaguely off into the distance like usual.

"Sing, Sora!" Axel prompted.

Sora smiled uncertainly at him and began signing along with the lyrics.

"Sing, Roxas!"

"RAGH!"

"Ow...! Okay, fine, don't sing," Axel grumbled good-naturedly.

The song came to a close, and Demyx hit the pause button. "Ooooo-kay, let's let one of the ladies go next! How abooooout.... Gah! The puppy eyes are too adorable, I can't pick!"

"Eenie, meenie, miney, mo," Axel said. "Xion wins."

"Whoo! Okay, then, sweetie, pick a card!"

Eyes glinting mischievously, Xion selected the fish picture.

"YES!" Demyx crowed. "Nine Little Fishies, my favorite!"

"Shut up!" Roxas yelled.

"Demyx," Axel said in a pained voice.

"Oops!" Demyx hunched his shoulders and stage whispered, "Nine Little Fishies, my favorite!"

"I want to go home," Riku moaned.

Demyx and the girls sang enthusiastically about nine little fishies, and then it was Sora's turn. He picked the card with the crown on it.

"Whaaaaat? We don't get to sing the fishy song again?!"

Sora stared at him.

"Demyx, don't confuse him," Axel ordered. "Sora, we will be *happy* to sing the golden king song."

"And then the fishy song again," Demyx added.

Riku suddenly leaped up and knocked his chair over.

After music time, Roxas retreated to the quiet room as Axel switched with Demyx again and held up one of the library books he'd checked out for that week. "Okay, guys, another Christmas story for you all! Pay attention, I'm gonna be asking you questions as we read."

"*Another* one about Santa Claus?" Saïx complained.

Axel's eyes twinkled. "Yeah. Why, you have a problem with that?"

Saïx glared. "No."

"Santa's dumb," Riku declared.

"I wholeheartedly agree with you," Saïx murmured. Riku stared at him in surprise. And smiled.

Axel's mouth dropped open. "Riku *smiled!* At *Saïx!* Forget this, man, we're not reading about Santa today."

"Why not?" Xion exclaimed, alarmed at the sudden change.

"Because Riku gets to pick today's book, that's why! Riku, what do you want us to read?"

Riku gave Axel a wary look, then pointed.

"You know what, I'm not even gonna make you use your words this time, you are that awesome. Okay! *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* it is!"

When their group work was finished, Axel tackled the task of making Roxas pick up everything he'd dropped, thrown, or knocked over earlier in the morning, Demyx went to guard the computer from Riku, and Saïx finally had time to address the problem of Naminé's stained attire.

"Nothing," he called, looking up from her backpack. "She doesn't have a change of clothes."

"Check the other girls'," Axel said hopelessly. "If not, then...I guess put her in Ven's things 'til we can get her clothes washed?"

Saïx took Naminé (and Riku, who was getting antsy and in need of a walk) down the hall to the behavior unit, where one of the women who worked there got her changed. Then they circled all the way around the school for Riku's benefit and returned to the classroom, where Saïx got Naminé's original clothes started in the washing machine. She somehow still looked cute wandering around in Ven's khaki Capri's and Roxas's spare shirt.

Roxas stared at her.

"Look, Roxas, Naminé's wearing your clothes," Axel laughed.

Roxas suddenly pushed Naminé against the wall, still staring. She stared back, terrified. "Mine," Roxas said, tugging at the shirt she wore. Then he suddenly seemed to lose interest and wandered away. Naminé's expression eased back into vagueness and she made her way over to the art supplies, humming.

"Okay," Axel announced, "we had a WAY longer break than usual today, we need to get to work. Guys! Folders!"

Sora immediately shoved the toys he'd been playing with back on the shelf and ran to his desk, with Kairi and Xion following more reluctantly.

"Riku~, folders!"

No response.

"Come on, buddy, time for work."

As Axel sat with Roxas to work with him individually, Saïx kept a sharp eye on Riku. Demyx gave Ven a sensory board and then went around supervising the girls and Sora, helping whenever they got stuck. Once Riku stopped dragging his heels, he was, as usual, the first one to finish, and he angrily shoved his basket of completed tasks at Saïx, slamming his head back down into his arms as Saïx began to check his work.

"Riku, this is not even a pyramid, much less a rectangular one. And I *know* you know what a cube is. Do it right."

"I want computer!" Riku shouted at him.

"Computer is after lunch."

"No!"

"Do your work, then you'll get music."

"No...!" Riku shouted again, though less certain this time.

Sora, now finished with his own work, ran over and started sticking the cards back onto the folder open on Riku's desk. Since Riku's work was at a much higher level than his, he had no idea where the cards were supposed to go, so they ended up completely random.

"*Sora!*" Saïx snapped. "Go back to your desk!"

"Finished," Riku said mischievously.

"You do your *own* work. Sora, GO."

The younger boy retreated unhappily.

"Now, Riku, *do it right*, unless you want me to give you MORE folders to complete."

"NO!"

Meanwhile, Demyx had paused by Naminé's desk. She was humming very softly as she rocked back and forth. "Nami-chan! Folders!"

She paused briefly at the sound of her name, then resumed rocking.

"Naminé. C'mon, sweetie, time to work." He put a butterfly-shaped card in her hand. She immediately let it fall to the desktop. He put it back into her hand, then held her hand with the card poised over the open folder. "Match, Nami!"

She whined softly.

"Maaaaatch, Nami. C'mon, your butterfly is yellow. Where's the other yellow butterfly, Nami-chan?"

"Nnnnn," she insisted.

Sora came eagerly bouncing up. *"Match, Nami! Butterflies!"*

"Finish your work, then you can draw," Demyx said encouragingly.

She eyed him.

"Work *first*."

Between the two of them, they finally got Naminé to match the two butterflies. She stared at it, then began to wail quietly and tearlessly.

"Oh, come *on*, Nami," Demyx laughed, "you're acting like I'm torturing you or something."

Still sounding completely heartbroken, she dolefully dragged her arm back and forth across the desktop, matching cards.

"You're doing fantastic, Nami-chan! Keep it up!"

"Good job, Naminé!"

Ven, who had gotten bored, restlessly swept his arm across his wheelchair tray and knocked the sensory board to the floor.

As each child completed his or her work correctly, they were permitted to play as they waited for

their classmates to finish. Riku, curled up on a beanbag chair with his eyes closed and the headphones back over his ears, did not react at all when Sora sat down beside him and started running a toy car across the carpet, the beanbag, and Riku's arm. Ven sat quietly and watched the ceiling as he listened to music on the radio Demyx had set up for him.

Xion and Naminé were drawing pictures together, and Kairi came over to the beanbag chair with some toys. She and Sora took turns placing colored rings on some wooden pegs - at one point, Axel looked over and was delighted to find that somehow, Riku had been drawn into their game. Still curled up on the beanbag with his music, he nevertheless now had his eyes on the toy, and reached out to place another ring whenever it was his turn. "Good job, Ri," Axel praised in a whisper, looking around to make sure that Saïx was documenting. Sora and Kairi always did seem to be best at drawing the older boy out of his shell.

"Okay, guys, break time's over! Back to the table, time for social studies~!"

The substitute arrived as they were getting ready for lunch. Young and pretty, with short dark hair and long sashes on her outfit that made Axel wince, she looked around the classroom, eyes widening in response to Roxas screaming something on the other side of the room. "Uh - hello. I'm here for Saïx Tsukino...?"

"That's me," Saïx said shortly, trying to get Xion out of the closet. "Xion, come *out* of there, we're going to lunch."

"I wanna paint!"

The sub was still standing there, staring, which was not very promising. Sora ran up and started eagerly signing at her, and she gave him an uncertain smile.

"I'm Axel Hayes," Axel introduced himself, "I'm the teacher. That's Demyx over there, my other assistant."

"Yo!" Demyx called, waving as he continued to herd the growling Riku toward the door.

"Aqua Rainfell," she answered, sounding more certain as she held out a hand to Axel. (That is, until Roxas screamed again, drawing her incredulous eyes back toward him.) Her handshake was firm, so at least there was one thing she wasn't clueless about. "Is...Is he all right...?"

"Yeah - he's fine, he's just, uh...." *'Upset that he doesn't recognize you and you're not going away.'* "By the way, you should probably tie up those sashes or something, so they won't get ruined."

"Pardon?"

As she was dubiously doing so, Sora hugged her, and she smiled at him. "Hello, honey. What's your name?"

"I'm Sora!"

Her brow furrowed in confusion.

"This kiddo here is Sora, he's a real sweetie. He's non-verbal, but he's not deaf or anything, he can understand you. Do you know any sign language?"

"Uh...."

Axel kept his smile and did not sigh aloud. "Well, this is 'Please,' he'll say that if he wants permission for something."

Her eyes followed his gesturing hands intently.

"This is 'More.' And, heh, this is 'I love you,' you'll probably get that from him a lot...."

"I love you!" Sora chimed in, making her chuckle.

Roxas grabbed the stack of library books and threw them across the room.

"Scuse me for just a sec," *'gotta go reassure my buddy that the world's not ending just because I'm paying attention to you and not him.'* "Roxy! C'mon, let's clean up and go to lunch!"

"Do you wanna be Ms. Aqua or Ms. Rainfell today?" Demyx asked as he wheeled Ven up to join the line.

"Er...either one is fine."

"Are you coming with us?" Kairi asked.

"Um, yes."

"You ever been in one of these classrooms before?" Demyx asked.

"Cool down!" Roxas shouted, fleeing to the quiet room the instant the books were back in place and Axel's grip loosened a little.

"Really, Rox? *Now*?" Axel said in exasperation.

"Um...no," Aqua said helplessly. "What grade is this?"

"Specialized instruction," Axel said, leaning on the quiet room's doorframe as Roxas crouched on the carpeted floor and glared up at him accusingly. "They're at all sorts of grade levels - we deal with disabilities and some behaviors, as well as academics and life skills."

"This is Xion," Demyx said, "and our redhead is Kairi. Mr. Sulky here is Riku--"

"Let's go to *lunch*," Riku snarled, gripping his insulated lunch bag and refusing to make eye contact with the newcomer.

"In a sec, buddy, we gotta get Roxas out. Big guy here is Ven, and Little Miss Precious hiding behind Saïx is Naminé."

Aqua stared helplessly at the string of new names.

"And this is Roxas," Axel finished, steering the boy towards the line by the door and dodging when Roxas abruptly halted and tossed a fist over his own shoulder. "Just, uh, stay away from him...let us know if he tries to run out or if he and Riku try to go for each other's throats, but otherwise, just stay faaaar away."

"I wanna go to recess!" Roxas screamed.

"After lunch, kiddo."

Axel and Saïx accompanied them all to the cafeteria to help get them settled. They allowed Riku to listen to his music this time so that he'd hopefully behave, and Demyx would be better able to focus on Roxas. Fortunately, Aqua seemed to be perfectly willing to accept the task of feeding Ven.

"You guys be good for Mr. Demyx and Ms. Aqua, okay?" Axel said, ruffling Xion's hair. She reached up and pinned his hand to the top of her head.

Sora held out the package he had bought, which contained a giant chocolate chip cookie.

"Finish the rest of your lunch first, Sora."

"Are you going away, Mr. Axel?" Kairi asked worriedly, looking between him and the sub.

"Mr. Saïx is, but he'll be back tomorrow. I'll see you after lunch, okay?"

Xion twisted in her seat and stared up at him.

"I'll see you after *lunch*!" Axel repeated, laughing. "I'm not going anywhere, okay? I'll just be in the room."

"Going away?"

"Me," Saïx said. "I'm leaving for the afternoon. I'll be back tomorrow."

Xion whirled back around and started shoveling food into her mouth.

"I'll miss you, too," Saïx said dryly.

"Naminé, *eat!*" Axel urged. She had been staring vacantly into space, and now blinked at him in a slightly reproachful way. He picked up the spork and closed her fist around it. "Nami, eeeeeaat. You only have thirty minutes, hon." He glanced at Roxas, who was going to finish his pasta and fruit - the only items on the tray he was interested in - in less than five minutes, at the rate he was going. "Dem, one bite at a time, and try to get him to eat a meatball or two."

"Whoops, we're going too fast, buddy," Demyx said in response, pulling the tray away. Roxas screamed furiously at him. "Here, hereherehere, bite of pasta...." Roxas nearly bit the spork head off. "Bite of meatb--"

"NO!" Roxas yelled.

Axel glanced at Aqua, who was wide-eyed again. Not the best idea to further agitate Roxas when only Demyx would be able to handle him. "You know what, never mind; just slow down on the goodies and don't worry about forcing anything else on him. Aqua, if Demyx has to take Roxas out, and this one's giving you trouble," he indicated Riku from an angle where the boy couldn't see him, "get Ms. Gainsborough over there to help you, okay? She's the lady in pink. And I'll be back at the end of lunch to help you guys bring them in."

"All right," Aqua said readily, looking like she was trying to adjust to living on an alien planet.

Axel hesitated. "Demyx, you want me to stay here?"

"I got it, boss," Demyx said cheerfully, stabbing half a strawberry with the spork and handing it back to Roxas. "Go chill."

"Radio me if you need to."

"Will do."

Axel sighed and finally forced himself to leave.

After warming up his lunch, Saïx turned to face Axel, a little hesitantly. His friend was working on the computer, absently spooning leftovers into his mouth as he reached out every so often to type. As soon as Saïx approached, however, Axel swiveled his chair to face him. "You gonna eat with me?"

"If you're not busy," Saïx said self-consciously. "I have time before my appointment, so...but you've got so much work to do--"

Axel hooked his foot around the leg of a chair and pulled it closer to his own. Saïx smiled a little and went to sit down. "When do you ever get your work done?"

"Same time you do yours," Axel said with a wink.

"Oh, so you function every day on five hours of sleep, too. Glad to know we've got *something* in common."

"You graduate in May, right?"

Saïx paused and didn't say anything.

Axel frowned. "Are you not doing well or something?"

"No...it's not that," Saïx said quietly. "My grades are quite good, I've just been...reconsidering my career choice."

"Whaaaat?"

Saïx sighed deeply, resting his elbows on the desktop and leaning his forehead against his clasped hands. "It's been half a year," he murmured. "And it hasn't gotten much easier."

"But you've gotten so good!"

"Are you joking?" Saïx said sharply. "They all hate me, which is only fair since I *still* don't like them, they don't listen to me, they're not learning anything--"

"Saïx, honestly, you have no clue what you're talking about," Axel chuckled. "I've been teaching this class for three years, you've only been here since September. This is the best year I've had so far."

Saïx stared.

"I'm serious! Yeah, Roxas can be a butt, but he *is* responding better than he did last year, and haven't you noticed how he treats Xion? He actually *stops* himself sometimes, when he realizes it'll hurt her. I've never seen that kid do anything like that before, it's like he recognizes that she has feelings, too. And he did stop spitting, mostly."

"Ugh."

"He's getting more work done in a shorter amount of time, he'll catch up to Riku soon if he keeps this up. Riku has *friends* now, Sora and Kairi have been *awesome* for him. Sora's conversation is a lot more fluent now than it was at the beginning of the year, and he almost never forgets to sign anymore; Naminé comes out of her world to talk to us more than she used to; and Ven actually *uses the comm board* sometimes! Saïx! When I first got him, they said he was practically a vegetable; but *this kid has a brain*, Saïx! He likes things, he doesn't like things, he knows who we are and who the other kids are, he can do calendar with us now, he *talks*! He knows which buttons to press to say what he wants to tell us! That is awesome!!!!"

"Yes. I already knew you were a brilliant teacher," Saïx muttered.

"Sai, it's not just the kids, either. My team this year is perfect, too."

"Demyx does seem to be well-suited for this job...."

"Yeah, he's awesome, and I hope I can keep him forever and ever; but you, too, Saïx."

Saïx made a dismissive scoffing sound.

"I am serious. You *have* gotten more patient and discerning with them, just like I told you you would, and you can play Bad Cop when they won't listen to Demyx because they like him too much. You're not squeamish, and I can *always depend* on you, which is *not something I take for granted anymore*. And this year, I have had *the best* documentation ever. You take notes better than I do; do you realize how much time you've saved me with the paperwork? Heh, where were you two years ago when I nearly quit?"

"In school full time, thinking erroneously that I knew what I wanted to do with my life," Saïx grumbled.

"Sai. Really? Can you really look deep down in your heart and tell the total, honest truth, and say that you hate teaching?"

There was a long pause. Saïx finally said, "I like...*teaching*. When I can sit with a student who *cooperates*, and *listens* to what I am telling them...that expression on their faces, when they understand it, when they suddenly have the ability to do something that they were not able to do previously. *That's* what I like, and what I thought I'd be doing in the first place." He took a bite of the food he'd been neglecting. "And that is not what teaching, in actual practice, is about. It's not just this class, either; back when I was subbing, and when I was at the Academy.... It's as if no one *wants* to learn. The more I see it, the less I am able to understand it, and the more I feel like I'm in the wrong place."

"Everyone wants to learn, it's just...I dunno. It's not like we can start from the beginning, except with our own kids. We have to just do our best with whatever they learned before, on top of whoever teachers they had before."

Saïx sighed, slowly twirling his fork. "I didn't realize until this year how much I dislike children...."

"Well, not everyone's cut out for special ed. But you'll do fine in whatever classroom you end up in."

"No. It shouldn't matter." Saïx expelled a frustrated breath. "If I can't be successful with these students whom I find so challenging, what right do I have to go on and try to teach others, when my best already wasn't good enough?"

"Sai. It's specialization, you know? I happen to be a better ALE teacher than you are. You're better than me at other stuff."

"I suppose so...."

There was a pause.

"Do you really not want to teach anymore?" Axel finally said, his tone quiet and without judgment.

"...I don't know. It's just been so incredibly different than what I expected, I'm having doubts...."

Axel smiled a little and reached out to clap his shoulder. "Well, whatever you decide in the end, just know that I'm glad to have had you this year, all right? And I really did mean it when I said that having you and Dem together has been the best thing ever, I'll really miss you when you leave."

Saïx smiled, too, just a little. "Thank you, Axel. It is good to hear that."

O.O.O.O.O

In the cafeteria, Aqua was learning. "So they stay in the same class, with the same teacher, until they go to junior high school?"

"Yep, pretty much. Roxas and Ven were here last year, too, and so was Riku. Axel said that he'd had Naminé the first year he taught, but she went to a different school last year and then came back."

"So, you...this is your second year with this class?"

"Yep. I love it, it's been fun."

"*Really?*" Aqua said in astonishment, watching him narrowly avoid getting hit in the mouth by a

restless Roxas.

"Yeah. I mean, a lot of it is because working with Axel is super-fun, but still. I was a 7th grade team leader at Bastion Junior High before - it was *awful*; I never want to work in gen ed again. Little brats and Demyx do not mix."

"Mr. Demyx, I need a napkin," Kairi said.

"Whoa! Yes, you do!" he exclaimed, handing over a wad of them. "What happened?"

"Uh, Sora knocked my milk over," she said apologetically, trying to mop it out of the remainder of her spaghetti. Across the table, Sora clapped his hands over his face in an exaggerated picture of remorse.

"Ha ha, it's okay, little buddy, looks like she was almost done, anyway."

"Yup. It's okay, Sora! Do you want a carrot?" She held one out to him, and he accepted it with a shy smile.

"Are these two twins?" Aqua asked as she fed Ven another spoonful and then wiped his chin, which was getting messy again, with a napkin.

"Rox and Ven? Yeah."

"Even their hair looks the same," she chuckled.

"Yeah, I don't think their mom ever combs it. They're different as night and day, though - VenVen over there is the sweetest sweetie you ever did see, but *Roxas* here iiiiiiis, uh, let's say the Hyde to his Jekyll...."

Roxas's hand darted out, and Demyx saved Xion's Jell-O just in time.

"*No*, Rox! Hands to yourself!"

"Mine!" he shouted.

"*Xion's.*"

"You can have some, Roxas," she offered, scooping out a sporkful of Jell-O and plopping it on his tray.

"Aw, isn't Xion nice?" Roxas was already grabbing the glob of Jell-O and shoving it into his mouth as Demyx continued, "You can have that because she *offered* it, not because you snatched it off her tray like a big bad bandito, and by the way, there's these magical things called *spoons*, Roxas." Roxas ignored him as Demyx swiped Jell-O goo off his hand with a napkin.

"You really are a sweetie, aren't you," Aqua remarked, impulsively leaning over to kiss Ven's temple. He smiled at her and knocked a hand against her arm in a friendly way.

Riku, eyes closed as they had been throughout most of lunch, began to tap out a rhythm on the tabletop as he listened to his music.

"Naminé, *eat!*"

At the end of lunch, Axel returned to help them transition briefly back to the classroom, then out to the playground before going back inside to resume work. Ven, his wheelchair parked by the bench where Demyx and Aqua were sitting, waved his arm and laughed every time the wind blew. Sora, Kairi, and Xion played like most children, chasing each other around and (in the girls' cases), yelling happily.

Riku, deprived of his music again, set about on his usual journey, circling the playground's perimeter again and again while dragging his palm and fingers across the fence as he walked. He had to step around Naminé every time he passed the south corner, where she crouched as she sorted pebbles, twigs, leaves, and blades of grass into mysterious categories. Roxas played in a world of his own, running from slide to jungle gym to monkey bars with an expression of grim determination. At one point, he ran up to Demyx and started dragging insistently at his arm.

"Whoa, hey, Rox, use your words."

"*Ngh!*" Roxas insisted.

"Words, Rox! Tell me what you want."

"SWING!" Roxas shouted, as if Demyx was really stupid.

"Ohhhh, you want me to push you on the *swing*?"

"Come *on!*"

"Well, *okay*, then!" Demyx laughed, stumbling after him as Roxas towed him along like a dog on a leash. Aqua followed them uncertainly, and Demyx chatted with her as he pushed Roxas back and forth, until Roxas suddenly jumped off the swing and ran off again without a backward glance.

He was almost immediately tackled by Xion. "AAAHH!" he shrieked.

"I TOLD you I'd get you at recess!" she cried, laughing and squeezing her arms around him.

He grunted, submitting happily to the pressure.

"Come play with us, Roxas!"

He pushed her over and sat on her, not roughly.

"Urgh!" She struggled, then gave up and pouted at him. He stared down at her impassively, waiting for her to make the next move. "Kairi! Sora! Come help!"

Yelling in excitement, Kairi galloped over to them, and she and Sora seized Roxas by the arms and dragged him off of Xion. He made surprised, distressed sounds as they started piling pebbles on him; then he rolled over right on top of them, prompting shrieks of laughter.

"Wowww," Demyx said in awe, "Roxas is actually *playing* with them...." After a moment, he suddenly jerked in surprise. "What the-- Ohmigosh! Saïx is-- Aaahhhh!"

"What?!" Aqua exclaimed in alarm.

"I forgot the clipboard! Saïx isn't here to document! I forgot the freaking clipboard! Aaaahhh! Axel's gonna kill me!" He whipped out his cell phone.

Axel soon came out carrying two clipboards, one of which he handed to each assistant. "Dem, do you even *remember* how to document?"

"Uh...yes?" Demyx said sheepishly.

"Fantastic," Axel said with resigned sarcasm. "And Aqua, you guys are gonna write down every time Roxas screams - like, write the word 'scream,' and a tally mark for every time he does it. So, screaming, or every time he tries to hurt anyone or himself or damage anything, or tries to run away; and every time Riku listens to music, whether he's supposed to or not; and every time Sora uses sign language--" Seeing her expression, he shook his head. "Basically, both of you, every time any of the kids does *anything*, bad or good, write it down. And *put the time*, I have to know what time it happens. DON'T forget the time, Demyx!"

"I won't!"

Axel looked at Aqua again. "Well, the exact time for the bigger stuff, but if it's just things like screaming, just write how often he did it in, like, thirty minutes."

"I'll do my best," Aqua said cautiously.

"Thanks, no, you're awesome. It's just that Saïx is my fantastic documenter, and Demyx and I both kind of forget to pay attention because we know he's always got it covered, but-- Anyway, just do your best; I can hopefully piece everything together if I have two sets of notes."

"Don't worry, boss, we got this," Demyx assured him.

They took a short break after recess - Riku practically glued himself to the computer as if he was a

starving man being presented with a feast. "Remember, Riku, *first Mathmania*, and *then* you can mess around."

"I *know*!"

Just when Axel was starting to gear up for a class lesson, the door creaked open, and a pretty teenage girl peeked her head around the door with a little smile.

Kairi gasped in delight, and Sora ran to hug her. The girl hugged him back, putting a finger to her lips with her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Hey, Naminé!" Axel and Demyx cried together, "Look who it is!"

The little girl kept drawing, unresponsive.

"Naminéééé!"

"Look at the doooooor!"

Xion galloped over and planted her hands on either side of Naminé's head in order to lift her face. Naminé stared at the newcomer for a long moment, uncomprehending. Then her face finally lit up and she put down the notebook so that she could scramble to her feet and go running over to the door.

"Nami-chaaaan!" the girl cooed, wrapping Naminé in her arms.

Axel laughed as they watched. "That's Olette," he explained to Aqua. "She's in some program at her high school and comes here to volunteer twice a week. Naminé *looooves* her."

"They're so sweet," Aqua said, smiling as she watched.

"You been having a good day, Naminé?" Olette asked.

Naminé cradled one of Olette's big brown locks of hair between her hands and started bouncing it.

"Heh, you like my hair, Nami-chan?"

"I like you here," Naminé said in a very soft, very happy voice.

"Oh! She can talk?" Aqua said in surprise.

"Yup! She won't much, but she can."

Naminé practically sat in Olette's lap during the lesson, and was more talkative and aware of her surroundings than usual. When they were working on their folder assignments afterward and Olette had to leave her to go take turns with some of the other students, Naminé folded her arms on top of her work and hid her face in protest.

"Aww, Nami, come on, you can do your folders even when I'm not sitting next to you, right?"

Axel had handed Aqua a sensory board. "Here, you can work with Ven on this. Have him touch it, and just, like, talk to him about the different textures, you know? See how long you can keep his interest."

"All right," Aqua agreed. She pulled a chair close to the boy and gently lifted one of his arms, maneuvering his stiff fingers onto a patch of cotton balls. "See how soft it is, sweetheart? Like you're touching clouds, way up high in the sky, all fluffy and cool as the wind blows them along...."

Ven smiled and made a soft cooing sound, his eyes fixed on her.

"And this one is oooohhh, scratchy and rough, like I bet your daddy's chin is before he shaves in the morning. Do you ever watch daddy shave, Ven?"

"Unh."

She affectionately brushed her fingertips against his cheek. "You are just the sweetest thing, aren't you."

"Rrrhm." He made the throaty sound that was his laugh.

"I like you very much, too, sweetheart," she said, her voice ringing with sincerity.

During P.E., a boy with spiky black hair came trotting into the gym, hopping over a stray ball that came rolling across his path. "I'm here~!"

"Hey, Zack!" Axel called. "Aqua, this is my son, Zack. He comes and hangs out with us sometimes during his recess."

"Hello, Zack," Aqua greeted warmly, bending down a little to be closer to his eye level. "I'm Ms. Rainfell."

He studied her a moment, then smiled. "Would you ever date younger men?"

"WHOA!" Axel yelped, as Aqua's mouth dropped open in astonishment. Axel wrapped a hand over Zack's mouth and yanked him away from her. "What a weird kid, I've never seen him before in my life, ha ha ha!"

"Daaad," Zack protested through Axel's fingers.

"I-It's nice to make your acquaintance," Aqua stammered.

"Why don't you go *play*," Axel said firmly, shoving Zack off in the direction most of the class.

"I can't talk to the pretty lady some more?"

"NO."

"Aww, hogging her all to yourself...."

"Zack!"

Grinning, Zack finally turned his attention to the other kids, looked around, and trotted over to where Roxas was lying on top of a basketball. "Hey, Roxas, wanna play basketball?"

Roxas glared up at him, lost his balance, and fell off. Zack caught the drifting ball with his foot and bounced it up athletically into his hands. "C'mooooon, play with me?"

"Give it!"

"Come get it!"

Roxas surged to his feet and stormed after him. Zack laughed and ran, dribbling the ball as he went, but Roxas caught up to him and managed to snatch the ball mid-dribble. Zack gave chase ("No traveling!") and attracted the attention to Xion, who popped up in Roxas's path so suddenly that he almost fell.

"I got him, Zack, I got him!" she cried gleefully.

"MOVE!" Roxas yelled. Xion snatched the ball out of his hands and ran.

Once Roxas and Xion were occupied in a cross between basketball and Tag, Zack moved on to Sora, who was trying to move himself along on a scooter but was too slow to catch up to Riku. "Hey, Sora!"

Upon seeing him, Sora's eyes lit up, and he hopped to his feet to follow Zack. He tapped on the other boy's back to get his attention and signed, "*Play with us all day?*"

Zack, who only recognized the word 'play,' said, "Yup, I'll play with you. Here." He held up a hula hoop and waved it invitingly. Sora hopped up and down in excitement. "What, you want to give it a try?"

"No! You do it!"

"Huh?"

Sora grabbed the hoop, managed to get it over Zack's head, held it at waist level, then shook it from side to side and let go. It fell to the ground around Zack's feet.

"Hold on, I got a better idea. Let's go get your scooter." Kairi had stolen it by this time, so Zack had to get another one for Sora. "Here, Sora. Sit on the scooter and hold the hula hoop, and I'll pull you." Then he ran to catch up to Riku, with Sora rolling along swiftly behind him, the younger boy's eyes and mouth wide open in silent delight.

Riku was circling the gym, stimming off the wall with one hand like he'd done on the playground. Matching his pace, Zack took Riku's free hand and pushed the hula hoop into it before letting go. Riku did not acknowledge him at all, but he did keep tight hold of the hoop, which jerked him to a stop for a moment because of Sora's weight. Frowning, Riku heaved forward and started walking again, now pulling Sora.

"Fun!" Sora signed quickly before clapping his hand back on the hula hoop.

Riku was now pulling Sora behind him with both hands. Though he looked straight ahead, his expression had softened into something almost like a smile.

O.O.O.O.O

After school, Aqua wheeled Ven along behind Axel to the bus loop so that he could focus on escorting Roxas. "Here they are," Axel announced to the bus driver as they approached.

"Well, now, looks like Roxas is in a better mood, huh?" Mr. Brown said with a smile.

"Hopefully." Axel laid a hand on Roxas's shoulder and tried to look him in the eye. "You ended on green today. Keep it up and *stay good*, okay?"

"...."

"No more hitting. You do what Mr. Brown says. Got it?"

"I'm going home," Roxas mumbled. He pulled free and started to walk up the steps onto the bus. He abruptly reversed direction, came back, and pressed his face against Axel's shirt. Axel smiled and started to bring his arms up to hug him, but Roxas pulled away again and marched back up the bus steps without speaking or looking at him.

"Heh. Love you, too, kiddo."

Meanwhile, Mr. Brown and his assistant were getting Ven settled on the wheelchair lift. Aqua clasped his hand and leaned over to kiss his temple. "Good-bye, sweetie. I really liked working with you today." Ven lifted his other hand and stroked it gently against her face.

Once the twins were out of their charge, Axel and Aqua made their way over to the parent pick-up area where Demyx had the other kids. "I see Belle's car," he called to them. "She'll be here in a minute."

"Mommy?" Kairi said eagerly.

"Yup, your mom's comin', Kairi! Xion, put that back in your backpack and come stand over here!" Xion smacked kisses on Sora's and Naminé's heads, then trotted over to join her sister.

Their mother soon came into sight, and the girls ran to meet her. "Mommyyyy!"

She hugged them both warmly. "Did you have a good day at school?"

"Yup! Mommy, look what I made for you!"

"Ohhh, *thank* you, darling!" She stood up with the picture in her hands and glanced inquiringly at Axel.

"Both on green, and both girls today."

Belle chuckled a little. "That's good to hear, and I'll let him know. Thank you so much!"

"See you tomorrow," he said, and returned each of the girls' hugs. "You can go, by the way," he told Aqua as Belle and her daughters left. "Demyx and I can handle the rest."

"Are you sure...?"

"Sure, go ahead. Oh, but lemme get your number, so next time-- Uh, well, would you mind coming back if we ever need you, or did we totally scare you off...?"

"Oh, no, I'd love to see Ven again! Here, I've got business cards in my purse somewhere...."

Naminé was then picked up by her mother, who demanded to know why her clothes were in such a state.

"You know, Larxene, I've told you this before, but white isn't exactly the best color for someone who spends all day in a classroom like ours."

"This happens *all the time*. We drop her off pristine, and she comes back looking like she crawled out of a dumpster. Is there a *problem* with the way you run your class, Axel?"

"Well, all I can say is that the washing machine can only do so much about stains, especially when we're not allowed to keep bleach in the room. Speaking of which, it'd be EXCELLENT if you could pack a change of clothes for her every day - Sapphique's been pretty gracious so far, but we're kind of out of options when she ever decides she doesn't want to keep lending out her kids' clothes to completely different students."

Then it was Sora's older brother, a pierced and tattooed college dropout in a black tank top and ripped jeans who came slouching up, actually prompting a few mothers to hurry their children out of his way.

"What's up, Van," Axel said, and was ignored.

Sora flung himself at his brother and hugged him tightly.

"Get off."

"Made cookies in school today!"

"I don't care."

Sora pulled the one he'd saved out of a pocket of his backpack and held it up. Van grabbed it in such a way that roughly half of it broke off in his hand, which he took a bite of. Sora gave Riku and his teachers quick, one-armed hugs. Then he joined his free hand with his brother's and walked off together with him, starting to eat the half of the cookie that had been left in his grasp.

"One more to go~" Demyx sing-songed. "You wanna head back inside?"

"No, you can. I'll watch him."

"You sure?"

"If it was any other kid, I'd have left you to it, but I'm not sure who's picking up Ri today."

"Hope it turns out all right," Demyx said, and clapped him on the shoulder before going inside.

Axel's worries were confirmed when, about a minute before the kids who hadn't been picked up yet were supposed to be taken back inside, a truck came roaring up way too fast, screeching to a halt beside the curb.

"Kadaj--" Axel started to say, but there was just no time. Riku was instantly striding past him, tossing his backpack into the truck bed, and gracefully swinging himself after it, since Yazoo and Loz were taking up the other seats. The car took off almost before Riku had finished huddling in a corner of the bed with his hands pressed over his headphones. "Dear Jesus God in Heaven, make sure nothing happens to that kid, would ya?" Axel shook his head as he pulled out his phone and sent a text to the boys' father.

"Aaaaand now for today's crushing load of paperwork...."

Axel found his son waiting for him in the classroom, sucking on a lollipop as he played a computer game. "Zack, my man. Your day go okay?"

"Yup."

"Hey. *Hey*."

Zack glanced at him curiously.

"No more flirting with women almost old enough to be your mom."

"I was *joking*!"

"Weeeelll, it's not funny, and it's gonna make people wonder what kind of stuff I'm letting you watch...."

O.O.O

Author's Notes: There are a few minor intentional inaccuracies (for example, most special ed staff are female, and only ONCE have I ever heard of a special ed classroom with all-male teachers/assistants XD), a few inaccuracies that I couldn't avoid, and who knows how many unintentional ones due to the fact that I've never actually worked in one of these classes full-time. Still, I did my best to make this realistic.

I apologize if anyone was offended by anything in this story. My sole intention in writing this was to explore an idea to the best of my ability. I have only the highest respect for all students, families, and staff involved in special education.

Ftr, there are many different branches of special ed - the classroom in this story was specialized instruction, for kids with mental (and sometimes also physical) disabilities who would be unable to

function in a general ed class full time. (Some of them might, with supervision, go out into general ed for a brief period during the day.) Specialized instruction is designed to meet their needs and help them learn in a much more productive way. The Roxas in *Good Talk* is in a behavior unit, which is for kids who may or may not have disabilities and are usually *capable* of doing grade-level academics, but are so disruptive and/or violent that they can't be in general ed for some or all of the time. Behavior units are focused, in addition to academics, on teaching them how to properly manage their behavior. Some of these kids (like the Ven in *Before Sora* would if his school had a special education program) can go out into general ed, but use the behavior unit as a sort of home base, or as a place to cool down when they get upset. Then there are mentally disabled kids like Miranda in *Stepsiblings*, who are high functioning enough to be able to do fine in general ed as long as they have modified assignments and help from an instructional assistant. They might use the specialized instruction classroom as a home base. There are also units for kids with extreme autism who are too disruptive/violent for either general ed or the other special ed classes; their learning environment is very highly structured and customized to accommodate them. (Most autistic kids do fine in either the other special ed classes or in general ed, but the autism units are for extreme cases.) Then there are students with learning disabilities who are virtually indistinguishable from general ed students, except that they also have extra help and modified assignments; and there are kids who have full mental faculties but are physically disabled, who are in all gen ed classes and do the same work as their peers, but might need physical assistance or modifications (such as the use of elevators or typing devices). Each child in special education has his or her own unique set of special needs, so not all of them are easy to categorize. XD Regardless, every possible effort is made to help each student, whether general ed or special ed, learn at their full potential.

Obligatory story origins! Around January or February 2012, I think, I was working in a specialized instruction classroom, and it suddenly occurred to me to wonder what it would be like if Axel was a teacher for a class like this, and Saïx was an assistant. I didn't think that the idea would be something I'd have any interest in actually writing out, but then I woke up the next morning *flooded* with ideas for this fic, and I drafted about half of it. Then the story sat dormant for a year because I thought it would be difficult to pick up again where I had left off, but when I tried it again last night, it flowed *so well*. XD

Xion's dad is Vexen. :p She is intersex in this story, hence his interest in her self-image.

Saïx and Santa...read "No Need To Hide." XD

And Kiryn is the reason why Olette & Naminé were all lovey-dovey in this fic; originally, there was no particularly special bond between Olette and any one of the kids~

My limit for one-shots is supposed to be less than 10,000 words, but I really didn't want to break up this story. *sweatdrop*

Treasure of my Heart - Closet (theme 10) {Van & Sora}

***Treasure of my Heart* , a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Sibling Challenge by Inmate XIV ,
written by Raberba girl**

Closet (theme 10) [rough draft]

Eighteen-year-old Van (Vanitas) & six-year-old Sora

Summary: Sora would appreciate his big brother's comfort more than vengeance.

A/N: Takes place in the same universe as *Welcome To Our World* (though roughly a year or two before the events of that story). Neither Sora nor Van knows very much sign language yet. I wasn't sure about Van's and Sora's ages, so I might have to tweak them a bit if I ever hammer out a timeline for this universe.

O.O.O

Van suddenly lifted the headphones away from his ears and listened, frowning. Then he impatiently switched the music off and listened some more.

It was far too quiet. Usually he could hear the sound of the TV or the radio, or Sora running around or whatever, but it felt like the house was empty.

Van got up and looked into the bedroom his grandmother shared with Sora. Gran and the cat were both asleep in her bed, the yellowed lace curtains stirring gently in the breeze, but there was no sign of Sora. Van went back out and checked the kitchen, the living room, the tiny front and back yards....

Nothing.

"Sora!" he yelled.

Silence.

"SORA."

He must have run off. Well, wandered off. Or maybe he'd been kidnapped...stupid kid would follow anyone who offered him candy or even smiled at him....

Van was just putting on his shoes when he thought he heard a soft thump from somewhere in the house. He paused, frowning. "Gran?" There was no answer - which didn't really tell him anything, since Gran was half-deaf and probably wouldn't have heard him even if she was awake. Van sighed and pulled his shoes back off, then went to check her room again. She was still asleep, but this time, he thought to look in the closet.

It surprised him when Sora turned out to be in there after all. "Sora?"

The boy was huddled on the floor, hugging his knees and looking uncharacteristically miserable.

Van frowned and crouched down before him. "What are you doing in here? Playing hide-and-seek and mad that I didn't look for you? I can't play games you don't *tell* me about, stupid." Not that he would have played even if Sora had asked, but still.

Sora buried his face in his arms.

"...Hey."

Nothing. Van finally grabbed Sora and hauled him bodily out of the closet. Sora, crying now, struggled free and curled up on the floor again.

"Hey. *Hey*. Talk to me, Sora, or I'm just gonna shut you in here and go back to my music."

Sora finally signed the word "help."

"Help? Help with what? If you're hungry, suck it up, there's nothing to eat; I'm not gonna play with you, I'm not playing doctor to your stupid toys if you broke them, I'm not--"

"*Help*," Sora repeated miserably. "*Help, please. Brother.*"

"Help with *what*?"

Sora lay down completely on the floor and curled up.

"Ugh, whatever; I'm just gonna--"

The edge of Sora's shirt had ridden up. Van frowned, poked the shirt up farther and saw fresh bruises on his brother's flesh, as if he'd fallen hard on something or run into something. Or been hit by something.

"...Sora."

No response.

"*Sora*," Van said angrily, "where'd you get these?" He jabbed at one of the bruises, and Sora cried out in pain. "Answer me!" Van grabbed his arm and hauled him upright. "Did someone hit you at school?" But Sora had seemed cheerful when he'd picked him up earlier.... "Was it--?"

Dirt streaks on Sora's arms and legs. He'd been playing outside before Van had heard him come back in earlier; had it just happened in the last couple of hours?

Van stormed outside and soon found the kids Sora had been playing with. "Oi."

The kids eyed him nervously and started moving away.

"*Oi*." He seized one by the shirt and dragged him close. "What happened to Sora?"

"I dunno," the kid said sullenly.

"We don't wanna play with that retard anymore," said another kid nearby. Van immediately punched him in the mouth. The boy toppled to the ground, screaming as blood ran down his chin, and the other kids screamed too and ran away.

"*You're* gonna be a retard after I finish bashing your head in," Van snarled.

"Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" the kid shrieked. Van started to kick him, then noticed that doors were opening and that people were probably going to call the police if they saw him beating up a little kid. He ran.

Once he was out of the neighborhood, he slowed down and began wondering what to do for the rest of the afternoon and evening until it'd be safe to come back home. He had no money, but that wasn't much of a deterrent. If he could find someone to hang out with whom he didn't hate, it might even be fun.

Van was just heading toward the Crescent triplets' house when it occurred to him that he'd left Sora behind. *'...He's fine. Gran'll wake up and coo over him and he'll be fine. He's always smiling, he'll forget about it soon.'* But there was no food in the house...Gran was so useless anyway, with her bad eyesight and shaky hands and the way she never had any appetite or energy.... *'He's alone,'* Van couldn't help thinking. *'I just left him there.... I didn't even think, I just barged out looking for a fight, and Sora's been curled up in the closet all this time.'*

He gritted his teeth in irritation. Why'd his brother have to be like this, anyway? Sora was hopelessly behind all the other kids, he couldn't even *talk*, and he should have had parents taking care of him but all he had was a grandmother who was useless for everything except the roof over their heads and the welfare checks and her legal guardianship, which meant the only one left for real was *Van*, Van who'd never wanted a brother and never wanted this life and shouldn't have to take care of anyone except himself...

He banged open the front door, ignoring his grandmother's startled cry, and kicked off his shoes in the entryway.

Gran, huddled on the threadbare sofa, squinted across the room at him. "Oh...oh, Van, dear, where have you--?"

"None of your business."

"Where's Sora?"

"He's *here*, duh!" Van stormed into the bedroom and flung open the closet door. Sora blinked sleepily and scrambled to sit up. "You know Gran has no clue you're even in here? She thinks you've been out with me all this time. You're like a little rat crawling around in the corners, we forget about you all the time, you know that? I bet if this house ever burns down, you'll be holed up inside somewhere and you'll burn to death and we won't even remember you 'til, like, a week later, and then it'll be 'Good riddance' because I hate how I'm always having to run around after you and you're always in my way and I'm *sick* of it."

He was probably saying too much too fast for Sora to understand, but the boy did seem to catch on to the general tone just fine. He was curled up tighter than ever.

Van finally sighed and sat down. He started scooching his way into the closet, knocking things out of the way as he went. "Move. *Move*." Sora struggled to make room for the much bigger boy, and ended up practically in his lap. He gripped Van's tank top in his fists and stared miserably at the floor.

"You hungry?"

Sora nodded.

"Too bad. I *told* you, we're out of food. You're gonna keep being hungry, all night 'til you get to school tomorrow. I *told* you that, you have to listen when I tell you things or you'll *miss* stuff. You just let people do whatever they want to you, don't you."

Sora laid his head against Van's chest. After a minute, he seemed to relax into resigned misery, rather than the more desperate pain he'd appeared to be in before.

"...." Van finally put his arms around the boy. "Sora."

"*Brother*," Sora signed.

"Shut up. Look, get mad when they're mean to you, got it? Hit them, bite them. Don't let 'em call you names."

Sora put his hand on Van's arm and squeezed gently.

"What's that supposed to mean?" There was no answer. *'Maybe we should start learning more than just a few sign language words....'* He'd seen two deaf people 'talking' one time at Sora's school. The swift, graceful way their hands had moved, their expressions, like they were having an entire conversation in another language rather than just conveying basic information.... *'Is Sora even smart enough to learn how to do that?'*

Sora made the humming "vvvv" sound that Van had only recently figured out might be Sora's way of saying his brother's name.

"What, Sora."

Sora set both palms against Van's chest.

"Stop it." He brushed Sora's hands away. Sora pushed at Van's heart again, more insistently this time. "What do you *want*?"

"Thank you."

"Thank you for *what*? Geez, Sora, you really are retarded."

"Thank you. Help. Brother. Please. More." Sora signed his small vocabulary over and over again, looking frustrated.

'That's all he knows,' Van thought. *'Just those and a few more, that's it. ...If he knew sign language for real, could he have told me where he got those bruises?'* "Just shut up, Sora. Go watch TV with Gran, I'm gonna go out and see if I can...find something for dinner." He heaved Sora off his lap and got to his feet. Sora held his hand. "Ugh, get off...." Sora squeezed tighter. Van sighed and led him to the living room, where Sora climbed onto the couch and started cuddling with his grandmother.

"I'm going out," Van said.

"Where?" Gran asked in tremulous alarm.

"None of your *business*! Get off my back, I can come and go whenever I want!" Van shoved his feet into his shoes and slammed out the door, tears stinging his eyes. *'I hate this life...I hate being poor, I hate having family always dragging me down, I hate that they're stupid and I hate that I'm too lazy to just take off on my own....'*

O.O.O

Author's Notes: (It's not 'laziness' that keeps him home, ftr. ^^; And he's probably gonna steal dinner, though I hope he manages to obtain it in a more legitimate way....) **No offense was intended to anyone by this story. :/ Sometimes it's hard to balance the writer's perspective and attitude with the narrator's.**

I couldn't figure out a good way to end this. Van will eventually get steered toward the resources he needs for he and his brother to learn more sign language, and by the time of *Welcome To Our World*, they're both fairly fluent. I didn't want to disrespect their grandmother, but it was hard not to, writing from Van's POV. :/ Basically, both their parents are out of the picture and their grandmother can barely even take care of herself, much less a troubled teenage boy and a child with special needs. I don't think Van has gainful employment, either. :/ Hopefully things will start looking up for them as time passes and Van hopefully, by some miracle, manages to stay out of serious trouble long enough to get more mature and responsible...hopefully....

Drafted this in one sitting just now because I'm in a procrastinate-on-high-priority-To-Do-List-by-working-on-low-priority-To-Do-List mood. *sweatdrop* Also, I just really wanted to write and post some WTOW VanSo. XD That one-shot wasn't supposed to be continued, but a while ago, I got an idea for a sequel of sorts to be part of a much larger story (though the story is huge and complicated, and I wonder if I'll ever have time to actually work on it and finish it). Then, when I was brainstorming for this challenge, I kept getting a lot of ideas for WTOW siblings, particularly Van & Sora, so I guess WTOW is on its way to becoming yet another one of R.girl's expanded alternate universes. *sweatdrop*

Lol, I've been watching *Switched at Birth* on DVD; and COMPLETELY by coincidence, the episode of *Community* that Dad and I watched today had a deaf character in it who interacted with Abed in a few scenes. I think all that is what put me in the mood to want to post some WTOW VanSo *now*, when I should really be working on other things. X'D Also, I looked up ASL renditions of *Frozen* songs on YouTube, and one of the "Let It Go" videos made me all teary-eyed *yet again*. XD I love watching people 'sing' in sign language, it's beautiful. ...The ASL arguments in *Switched at Birth* are actually fun to watch, too. X'D I'm in awe of what an expressive language it is.

End Notes

After writing this one-shot, I read "With the Light" (an excellent manga series by Tobe Keiko about the mother of an autistic boy), which gave me a lot of ideas for improving this story when I revise it.

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